**Personalized Learning**

Personalized Learning is a trendy buzz phrase that is being used as an alternative to “one-size-fits-all” instruction. The U.S. Department of Education defines it in conjunction with the terms differentiation and individualization in the 2010 Education Technology Plan (1.usa.gov/14AnJbu) as follows, “Personalization: Instruction is paced to learning needs, tailored to learning preferences, and tailored to the specific interests of different learners.” (Bray and McClaskey).

There are many ideas about what Personalized Learning is not, and some discussion about what it is, but not one clear and concise definition. According to various sources I found, Personalized Learning is learning that is tailored to the individual needs of each learner instead of by age or grade level. It is learning that is supposed to start with the learner. It takes a holistic view of the individual, skill levels, interests, strengths and challenges, and prior knowledge. The learner is supposed to own their learning. Unfortunately not many students have been encouraged or shown how to “own” their learning.

What I do in my classroom on a day-to-day basis is anything but one-size-fits-all. I used to teach elementary school. I loved every minute of it, but to do it right was exhausting and I knew I was better suited to older learners. My school was not departmentalized so I taught seven subjects almost every day. I had to make materials for three reading groups and two math groups every day in addition to teaching science, social studies, health, spelling, writing, and language arts (just to name a few). This required hours of purposeful planning and the creation of materials tailored for each learner’s level. I knew that I could not continue to maintain the level of personal attention I gave to each learner and still keep my sanity. So I left.

Now I am in the magical world of middle school mathematics. It is a wonderful place! I teach three sections of Common Core 8 mathematics to seventh graders and two sections of Common Core 7 mathematics. I give my students their “road map” at the beginning of each unit. The road map has a list of the formal common core objectives with all the mathematician jargon and also a student-friendly checklist sorted by objective that they glue in their notebook. As we go through the unit they rate their understanding. Several times during the unit I compare my checklist with theirs and see if we agree. Yes, I keep a spreadsheet sorted by objective for each of my students. It keeps them on their toes, but it also lets them know that I care enough to keep track of what they know and remember and what they have been getting by with. I believe in standards based grading. Math is a continuum. Some students will understand and master a concept the first time they see it. Others will need more time but will eventually get it. Still others will not really ever understand. Just because I say the test is on Friday doesn’t mean that all of my students are at the mastery level. Some need more time to build the connections.

The bottom line is one-size has never fit all. I believe in tailoring education to the needs of individuals, but I don’t need a fancy buzzword to do that. It’s called doing my job. I don’t think we need any more reform movements that bash formalized systems of mass public education.

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**Reflection**

**Technology in the Classroom**

Like any method of delivering instruction, using technology in the classroom has its positives and negatives. When used purposefully, technology can be motivating and make learning or reinforcing a concept fun.

My personal philosophy is that technology should be used as a tool. It should never replace knowing the skill or understanding how or why something works. We have created several generations of “button pushers” who expect instant gratification with minimal effort. They are able to push buttons – buttons someone else has programmed – to achieve their desired outcome. If the technology fails at any point along the way, most do not know how to fix it, or worse, cannot function without it. Calculators and basic facts come to mind; so do cell phones and not being able to read a map.

I love some of the math/engineering programs that are available. Geometer’s Sketchpad, AutoCad, and Tinkerplots are fantastic programs that make it easy to change program parameters quickly without erasing and recalculating. But the user has to have an understanding of the program and the parameters to use and understand it, and enough knowledge and skill of math to understand and interpret the outcomes.

**Strengths**

My greatest strength is my ability to collect and analyze data. In my prior career, I had to collect, organize, and make decisions on an incredible amount of data. Everything we did was considered a fire that had to be put out. I took that love of data analysis and transferred it to my classroom. So I am a completely data driven teacher. I teach 104 students and I can tell you about every one of them; their strengths, their challenges, how they are as a learner, and also as a person. I map every student by objective which gives me (and them) an up to date list of what they know, how well they know it, and what they still need to do. I believe personal connections are vital. If your students don’t think you know them or care, you will be less effective.

Back in the ‘90’s we used AutoCad to create engineering drawings. It was so nice to be able to change a parameter and manipulate a drawing without having to re-engineer it on paper. We also had no Internet. And we had to fight for every piece of RAM. And our screens were monochrome. But it was a huge deal when sailors no longer had to carry paper drawings up a mast to repair a system. Only problem was they then had to strap a huge computer (not tiny notebooks like we have today) around their neck instead. But it housed all of the drawings. Only it was monochrome and slow and hard to navigate through. Again, for every gain, there are always setbacks.

**Challenges**

The biggest challenges I have had with using technology in my classroom have been: limited access to computers, the unreliability of software and hardware, instruction time that is lost retrieving and returning computers to the cart and waiting for students to log in and out, and the incredible amount of my time spent creating purposeful technology tasks.

We have a limited number of mobile labs available and only one computer lab. We have a Google doc sign out sheet that is very helpful, because I can see that the same teachers sign out the labs for days/weeks at a time and make it impossible to plan far enough ahead for me to have a chance at reserving it. Then there are the teachers who sign out labs and end up not needing them – but also not erasing their name – so they sit unused because we all think they are unavailable.

When I do get the lab, very often the java script or some other necessary software is out of date, so the program we are trying to run will not run.

Just pulling the computers off the cart, waiting for them to boot up, logging in and getting to the appropriate site wastes a good ten minutes of class time. Then there are the students who can never remember their user name and/or password. More wasted time.

We have these great EPR (Every Pupil Response) clickers. One set. For six math teachers to share between all five of the classes each of us teach every day. To use those clickers requires setting up classes. Even if I import it as a spreadsheet, I teach 104 students in five separate sections at two different levels. So I have to painstakingly make sure it is all set up correctly. Then there is the lesson creation. It is overwhelmingly time consuming to import images into the software. It takes me hours to create a cute, engaging lesson that lasts fifteen minutes and tests basic skills. Yes. Basic skills. I cannot use the clickers to test higher-level thinking – it does not work in situations where students have to perform a lot of calculations by hand. And I have a lot of students with IEPs and 504s that require wait time and assistance, so again, not a good tool for them.

I love having a class website; however, I am stuck with TeacherWeb, a program that I absolutely hate. I do not have the time to learn how to navigate it so I am only using it for the basics, which is both frustrating and limiting. A lot of my colleagues are switching to Google Classroom. It sounds great, but again, I have no idea how it works and do not have time to muddle through it on my own.

Which brings me to this class.

**Goals for this Course**

Well, I am old and unfortunately a bit old school. Although I am very good at programming in languages (really, really old languages like Fortran, Pascal, C, C++, and Visual Basic), I learn best when I have someone clicking around and showing me the shortcuts. I have never been good at distance learning. To be honest, I don’t really understand it. I get way more out of the rich discussion and sharing that goes on in a classroom setting than I will ever get on my own following a syllabus. I have four kids and a lot of distractions. Leaving my house and going to “school” has always been the highlight of my week. That being said, I am excited to learn about all the new technologies that are out there. I am hoping to sort through and find some that will make my life easier and my classroom more engaging and fun than it already is!